

SPECIAL SKIING SECTION



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

A snowboarder's view of the North Peak slopes from Dercum Mountain at Keystone Resort in Colorado.

The WHITE ZONE

Colorado resort
caters to families

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NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENTS

'Pleasee, Dad, one more time,' begged Will, age 10, oblivious to the storm that had begun with a few drifting snowflakes and was now falling steadily. Getting a thumbs up from his dad — who was having just as much fun — Will and his sister gleefully dragged their snow tubes back to the starting point.

Some skiers, seeing the clouds settle over Dercum Mountain at Keystone Ski Area in Summit County, Colo., had already quit for the day. But at the tubing hill at Adventure Point, kids and adults were still standing in line for another turn.

Has skiing lost its luster? Not a chance. Here at one of Colorado's most popular winter playgrounds, family vacations will always mean the joy of skiing: gliding down fresh-groomed corduroy, carving deep powder and the promise of top-of-the-world views.

But for nonskiers — your uncle, your sister, *my* sister, certainly — Keystone's other winter activities, designed for all ages and interests, provide some equally enticing options. Tubing, consisting of hurtling down one of three humongous bobsled-style runs carved into the snow near the summit of Dercum Mountain, is just one of the more thrilling possibilities.

The doughnut-shaped tubes, twice the size of an ordinary tire inner tube and suitable for riders 6 and older, are constructed of heavy-duty vinyl with reinforced seams and two big handles. To ride one you need no skills other than the ability to hold onto the handles, the lung power to scream as the tube picks up speed and the nerve to sit still until the tube bumps to a stop at the bottom of the run.

When Will, his sister and his dad reached the head of the line, the tube operator — one at the top of each run — helped them link handles to make a "train." Then, with a



Tubers descend Dercum Mountain at Adventure Point.



Luncheon is served at La Bonte's Cabin at the base of North Peak.

running start, she launched the three tubes over the edge. As they hurtled downhill, the kids' happy howls wafted back up the slope.

SOMETHING FOR ALL

After 35 years as one of Colorado's leading ski areas, Keystone has built a solid reputation as a middle-priced family destination, with a professional ski school and a broad choice of hotels and condominiums.

With the recent addition of some backcountry terrain, the resort now has 2,870 skiable acres on three mountains, and 116 trails with a variety of terrain, enough to keep begin-

ners, intermediates and experts challenged.

And besides skiing? If tubing gets old, rent a snowbike or a slope cycle, also available at Adventure Point. The snowbikes consist of bicycle frames with handlebars, mounted on short-short skis. You sit on the seat, as on a bicycle, and steer. You also wear ski boots and short skis to help with turning and balance.

The snowbikes are easy and fun, and for beginners, have the added advantage of helping novices get the feeling of skiing. If you don't want to rent ski boots, try one of the slope

Please see **COLORADO** on D18

By BRIAN LAVERY
THE NEW YORK TIMES

Bulgaria may be known for certain things — its ancient monasteries, for instance, or the local habit of nodding one's head to say no — but skiing probably isn't one of them. That's beginning to change as the Bulgarian slopes, the site of Alpine World Cup races in the early 1980s, are increasingly being explored by bargain-seekers from the West.

New chairlifts and hotels open

nearly every year at the country's three main skiing destinations — Borovets, Bansko and Pamporovo — while Mount Vitosha, outside Sofia, remains an easy and popular getaway. But the resorts are small by American standards, with just one expert slope each.

The first substantial wave of foreigners has come from Britain, mostly via all-inclusive package tours that use inexpensive direct charter flights, since flying from London to Sofia on airlines like Alitalia

or Czech Airlines typically costs at least 120 pounds (about \$235 at \$1.80 to the pound).

American visitors may want to look into the variety of ski packages offered by British vacation providers. Balkan Holidays, for instance, sends trips weekly from Gatwick, about 30 miles from central London, and other airports; a week in a Bansko vacation rental apartment costs 400 pounds, including flights, lift pass, ski rental and lessons.

Given Bulgaria's popularity with

the British, workers in the tourism industry usually speak English as well as German and Russian. But it's not all smooth sailing. In Sofia, many shops and restaurants don't accept credit cards; in the mountains, tourists should prepare to hand over wads of Bulgarian leva, even for accommodations, unless they're staying at one of the major hotels.

Paying with plastic is less of a problem in Borovets, Bulgaria's oldest ski resort, 45 miles from the capital. A double in the 300-room

Samokov Hotel (011-359-7128-2501; www.samokov.com), a Communist-era behemoth, costs 70 euros (about \$85, at \$1.23 to the euro) in high season.

Situated at the foot of the 9,600-foot Mount Musala (the tallest peak on the Balkan Peninsula), the town is 4,600 feet above sea level and has trails at 8,500 feet. Six-day lift passes can be purchased for about \$140 at mountain stations. That altitude

Please see **EUROPE** on D18

SPECIAL SKIING SECTION

Keystone has all sorts of winter activities

■ COLORADO

Continued from Page D16

cycles, on which you stand. These are similar to a scooter, or as Will described his, "a snowboard with a handle."

Shoppers can spend a morning in the village at the River Run Base; sports fans can ride up the River Run Gondola to watch a football game in Killian's bar at the Summit House. We spent one afternoon in the living room of our condo, munching popcorn, catching up on our reading and watching the snow drift down in the woods.

You can rent ice skates and brush up on your spins at Lakeside Village, or try cross-country skiing at the Nordic Center, a mile from Lakeside Village. Here you can start on 16 kilometers of level, groomed trails and move on to 57 kilometers of "packed" trails in the White River National Forest. Or snowshoe in the same area; equipment rentals are also available.

To see where extreme skiers push the boundaries, book a Sno-Cat trip with Keystone Adventure Tours, which carries sightseers and skiers — the latter are dropped off to ski back down — into 861 acres of above-timberline bowls on North Peak and The Outback. The views are spectacular.

If the excitement of seeing the skiers jump out of the Sno-Cat, snap into their skis and take off downhill is catching, think about taking a lesson or two. The ski school classes, for kids and adults, do a good job of speeding never-evers past that awkward first and most essential lesson: learning the snowplow stop. As soon as possible the instructors move their classes out of the crowded River Run Base area and up onto 11,640-foot Dercum Mountain's easy "green" runs.

Mountain access is from the River Run Base and the Mountain House Base. From here, you can ski on to 11,660-foot North Peak, and from there to The Outback, at 12,200 feet, where the slopes are much less crowded.

WIDE-OPEN SPACES

As a purpose-built resort, Keystone has little of the historic charm of mining towns like Breckenridge,



Breckenridge Ski Area, one of Keystone's affiliated resorts, is in the distance. Other partners are Vail, Beaver Creek and Heavenly.

Aspen and Telluride. But when needed, there's been space to expand. As a result, the resort's several base-area villages, ski school, rental shops, restaurants and condo complexes now stretch along the base of the mountains, often at some distance from the village base.

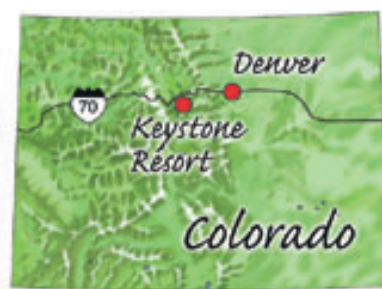
Getting around on the free ski shuttle buses that loop between the River Run Base and the Mountain House Base should be the ideal solution for getting from one place to another. But with eight in our extended family, there were times when we found that the bus schedules were unnecessarily unwieldy.

Getting the children into their ski clothes and boots, and getting everyone out the door and to the bus stop on time made some of our early mornings feel as stressful as the ones we'd left at home.

We also found that grocery shopping — an essential task if you're staying in a condo — was nearly impossible. There is a small market, the Trading Post, but it offered limited supplies and was often sold out.

GOOD EATIN'

As a result, we ate out more than expected, which was how we discovered Keystone's many good restaurants. There are 10 restaurants, cafes and snack bars at the River Run base, four of them full-service res-



TOM DE WALT / NEWS-PRESS

taurants. Lakeside Village has another eight cafes, four of which serve full dinners.

Our favorite two nights out, however, were at the top of North Peak, at 11,444 feet, at the Alpenglow Stube and Der Fondue Chessel. The former, a four-diamond restaurant, is rated the seventh best in Colorado by the Zagat Survey. The menu serves "Old World" food with a continental flair in a white-table atmosphere, in rustic Swiss-chalet surroundings. The latter is a grand medieval banquet and one of those rare adult restaurants that are also suitable for children. Entertained by an oom-pah band and singers, diners sit at long tables while costumed waiters pile the groaning board with enough food to feed a regiment.

Platters of thick grilled steak, chicken, fish and vegetables are crowded together with pots of hot raclette and melted fondue, served

IF YOU GO

See "Early Season Deals" on Page D17 for a special on the 36 Hours of Keystone, which begins Friday. Also note an American Airlines deal in 2006 for accompanying kids.

Getting there: Keystone is 90 miles west of Denver. To drive, take I-70 west to exit 205. Take Highway 6 east for 6.2 miles to Keystone. For airport shuttle service from Denver International Airport, call Colorado Mountain Express at (800) 334-7433. Round-trip rides are about \$75 per person.

Lift tickets and lodging: Tickets and lodging are most affordable when purchased as a package. Call Keystone lodging at (800) 404-3535 for complete information on hotels and condominiums in all locations, and available package rates. Visit <http://keystone.snow.com> for a six-day December Web special (Dec. 2-15 arrivals) that includes interchangeable lift tickets good at Breckenridge, Vail, Beaver Creek and Arapahoe Basin.

Information: Check the Web site for prices, rentals, activities, events and lodging. After checking in at the River Run Base, read the trail map's back side for a guide to resort layout, ski trails, activities, restaurants, services and phone numbers. Ask for a shuttle bus map and schedule.

Contacts: Call (800) 427-8308 for snow conditions; call (800) 255-3715 for information about the ski and snowboard school for children and adults. Also see www.vailresorts.com.

with hunks of bread and sliced roasted potatoes. The food is delicious, the dress casual and the atmosphere so boisterous that even howling children can hardly be heard.

Two other first-class restaurants, Ski Tip and Keystone Ranch, are associated with Keystone's early days when the resort was a family ranch. The dinners are excellent and the atmosphere nostalgic of a time when winter skiing was a family treat.

Happily, that legacy continues.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are Marina del Rey-based freelance writers.

Passengers who buy tickets on a bankrupt carrier should sigh with relief with the recent passage by the U.S. Senate of a bill that extends bankruptcy protection for air travelers. Since a

operating in bankruptcy, including Delta and United, half of travelers will be flying on a bankrupt airline in the coming months.

At press time, the bill awaited President Bush's signature, which we expect to happen by Saturday, when the current law expires.

Here's why you should care: The original law was passed to protect airlines struggling after Sept. 11, 2001. The act says passengers ticketed on a U.S. carrier that ceases operations have the right to get a ticket on a space-available basis on the same route. Passengers have 60 days from the date of cessation to make alternate arrangements. The law doesn't apply to foreign or charter carriers.

With the new bill, which will expire Nov. 30, 2006, the price passengers pay to travel on an alter-

nate carrier will be \$50 each way, up from \$25 previously. Raising the price to \$50 is still a bargain, considering that on some routes you could be paying up to \$599 for a one-way walk-up fare.

According to the bill, airlines must transport you on published fare routes, and connections are allowed. Airlines should consider travel to another airport in the same city as the same route. This law does not apply to an airline that is still operating but decides to cut routes.

While we would be quite surprised if a legacy carrier ceased operations, it could take days to be re-accommodated from hub cities with little competition. If Delta ceased operations, flights from Cincinnati would be hard to come by because there just wouldn't be enough seats available on alternate carriers, unless they brought in larger aircraft.

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